

First conclusive evidence of breeding in Senegambia and parental behaviour of Black Coucal *Centropus grillii*

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Le 22 décembre 2002, un couple de Coucals de Grill *Centropus grillii* avec deux jeunes a été observé près de Basse Santa Su en Gambie. Bien qu'on eût déjà observé certains comportements suggérant la nidification dans le pays, sa reproduction en Sénégambie n'avait pas encore été prouvée. Les parents étaient toujours en plumage juvénile, ce qui indique pour la première fois que le Coucal de Grill peut se reproduire avec succès à ce stade. Il s'agissait d'un couple monogame et il n'était donc pas question de polyandrie, comme c'est souvent le cas chez cette espèce. Le stade de développement des jeunes suggère que la ponte avait eu lieu à la fin octobre, que les œufs avaient éclos début novembre et que les jeunes avaient quitté le nid début décembre.

There are no complete breeding records for Black Coucal *Centropus grillii* from Senegambia. It is suggested to be a wet-season breeding visitor to The Gambia in August–late November, where it has been observed copulating, mate-feeding and carrying nest material^{1,3}. The few observations indicating breeding have all been made in the peak rains, ie during August to mid-September.

Observations

At 10.30 hrs on 22 December 2002, CRB and a small group of birdwatchers were in the Prufu Swamp area, just east of Basse Santa Su (13°19'N 14°12'W) in the Upper River Division of The Gambia. While watching a large expanse of open rice fields with scattered bushes, two coucals in juvenile plumage²⁻⁴ with tails about two-thirds grown and possessing obvious dull yellow gapes appeared from low, flattened vegetation 25 m in front of the group. The two juveniles, which exhibited similar stages of development, ascended and perched for short periods atop long, collapsed and tangled *Andropogon* grass stems, 10–15 m apart. Over a number of low short flights, their deportment was unsteady and lacked bearing, ie the typically awkward behaviour of young coucals.

Over c900 m² of muddy overgrown rice paddy, the fledglings loosely associated with two adults that were largely black below with some pale barring, plumage associated either with post-breeding moult or an incomplete black first-year breeding condition. Their wings and tail were wholly barred, strong indication of retained juvenile feathering^{3,4}. The adult flight pattern was direct with opening flaps and glides to grass and rice stems and low fence posts.

Over a 45-minute period, despite remaining in close proximity, the adults were not observed to feed the young, and no vocalisation from any of the four birds was heard. Sound-recordings of adult Black Coucal have been made in

The Gambia in October–November in Central River Division¹.

Elsewhere in West Africa, Black Coucal breeds in northern Ghana in July–August, in coastal Ghana in April–July and in northern Nigeria in July–August⁶. Photographs of the adults and juveniles were sent to R B Payne, who estimated fledging date, based on tail length, as 1 December. The incubation period in the species is known to be 14–16 days and fledging occurs at 18–20 days⁶. Therefore, in this instance, egg laying was in late October, hatching in early November and fledging in very early December.

Discussion

This observation of Black Coucal involving two adults with fledglings suggests that both parents tended the young. Therefore, in this case, a system of monogamy and biparental care, and not polyandry as is often cited for the species⁷, was employed. The plumage of both 'adults' was that of first-year birds^{3,4}, making this the first confirmation that Black Coucal can successfully breed at this age (R B Payne *in litt.*). Prufu Swamp lends itself as a suitable location for further work on the species' breeding ecology: the rice fields are suitably demarcated in quadrats, and observations in previous years have demonstrated that several birds use the site.

Acknowledgements

Tim Norris supplied the photographs and, along with Jenny Mallett and Alan & Juliet Bloss, supported CRB with field observations. Marie Ciss prepared the French summary. R. B. Payne made available currently unpublished texts and commented on a first draft. Nik Borrow and Chris Kehoe kindly provided information on sightings and plumages via the African Birding e-mail discussion group.





Figures 1–2. Juvenile Black Coucal *Centropus grillii*, Prufu Swamp, Upper River, The Gambia, 22 December 2002 (Tim Norriss)

References

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Captions to photos on facing page

Figure 1. Sociable Lapwing *Vanellus gregarius*, Iyve, Logone floodplain, Cameroon, 31 January 2001 (Ronald Messemaker)

Figure 2. Dwarf Bittern *Ixobrychus sturmii*, Erjos Ponds, Tenerife, Canary Islands, 23 August 2002 (Ludovic Scalabre)

Figure 3. Red-necked Phalaropes *Phalaropus lobatus*, Gongoni salt pans, Malindi, Kenya, 7 October 2002 (Colin Jackson)

Figure 4. White-tailed Lapwing *Vanellus leucurus*, Seawater Farms, Massawa, Eritrea (Jugal Tiwari)